

Congressman Mike McIntyre
Veterans Outreach Improvement Act of 2007, H.R. 67
Testimony before the Disability Assistance and Memorial Affairs
Subcommittee
Committee on Veterans Affairs
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Chairman Hall, Ranking Member Lamborn, members of the Subcommittee, I am honored and privileged to have the opportunity to testify before you today about the Veterans Outreach Improvement Act of 2007, H.R. 67. I have been a long-time supporter of our veterans who have selflessly served our nation in the armed forces, and I have introduced this bill to provide the assistance that veterans, in my district and yours, need and deserve. This bill was written with the help of the National Association of Country Veterans Service Officers and enjoys that organization's support.

The Veterans Outreach Improvement Act would address three important outreach issues: coordination, local grants, and funding. The bill would require the Secretary of the Department of Veterans Affairs to establish a plan to coordinate outreach activities throughout the department. It would also authorize \$25 million annually for three years that would be used to provide grants to state and local governments for outreach purposes. By empowering veterans service offices on the local level, we will get more bang for our buck to locate veterans and assist them in receiving the benefits they deserve.

Coordination

The Veterans Outreach Improvement Act would require the Secretary of the VA to establish, and annually review, a plan to coordinate outreach activities within the Department; specifically among the Office of the Secretary, Office of Public Affairs, Veterans Health Administration, Veterans Benefit Administration, and National Cemetery Administration.

Currently, different accredited organizations have trouble accessing veterans' records. A veterans service office may be unable to access a veteran's records if that veteran granted Power of Attorney to another organization even if both organizations are accredited by the VA. These organizations have begun to establish their own Memorandums of Understanding in order to share access to records, but this solution is only a temporary patch for a more substantial problem.

Under this bill, the VA Secretary would create a more fluid system that would address the access problem. Increased access to records would benefit veterans directly. Veterans should not have to cross any additional red tape in order to receive the benefits they have earned.

Outreach Grants

Many veterans, spouses, and surviving spouses are unaware of benefits to which they are entitled through the VA. According to a Knight Ridder report, as many as two million poor veterans or their widows might not be receiving up to \$22 billion annually in pensions to which they are entitled. Other estimates suggest that only 30% of veterans receive the benefits for which they are eligible. Widows are at an even greater risk for not receiving potential benefits. Of the survivors of deceased soldiers who could qualify for pension benefits, only one out of seven actually receives a monthly check according to the VA's own reporting.

One issue that has received increased attention after the recent publicity of the problems at Walter Reed Army Medical Center is the need for seamless transition. Unfortunately, too many of our military personnel come back from overseas and get lost in the shuffle when they leave the Department of Defense health care system and enter the Veterans Administration's system. Our nation makes a commitment to care for these brave men and women even after they leave the armed services. While there are currently increased efforts to improve seamless transition, many veterans have already fallen through the cracks. It is important that our government reaches out to these veterans to inform them of the benefits they have earned through their service.

There is clearly a need for greater outreach to our nation's veterans. This bill defines outreach as "the act or process of taking steps in a systematic manner to provide information, services, and benefits counseling to veterans, and the survivors of veterans, who may be eligible to receive benefits under the laws administered by the Secretary to ensure that those individuals are fully informed about, and assisted in applying for, any benefits and programs under such laws for which they may be eligible." America's veterans have earned these benefits, and it is our responsibility to inform them of what they have earned.

H.R. 67 would establish a program for the VA Secretary to provide grants to states for outreach activities, establishing cooperative relationships, and assisting in the development of veterans' benefits claims. States may award portions to local governments. If no local veterans service program is available in a certain community, states may use funds from grants to operate in place of a local agency or to establish a local veterans service program. Funds from the

grants will not be used to supplant existing state or local funds and will not constitute more than half of the cost of outreach activities for state or local governments.

In order to allocate these grants most efficiently, the Secretary would be required to direct assistance to areas with large and growing veteran populations. Service organizations in these areas will face greater difficulty in reaching out to veterans and helping them obtain the benefits which they deserve. Federal funding will be most effective in these areas.

Funding

H.R. 67 authorizes \$25 million annually for Fiscal Years 2007, 2008, and 2009. That sum is one dollar for each veteran in the United States. Also, this bill would establish a separate account in the Department's budget for the outreach program. This funding would have to be re-authorized after three years and could be adjusted according to the success of the program.

The bill's funding allocation could be used by state or local governments for various purposes, such as establishing education and training for state and local government employees for accreditation to provide outreach services. Funding from the grants could also be used to improve existing offices by hiring additional staff or improving their technological capabilities. In addition, these funds could be used to purchase advertising space or establish transportation programs for veterans to travel to health care facilities.

Conclusion

The United States makes a commitment to take care of each man and woman that serves our country in uniform. Our veterans deserve the benefits they have earned, and it is our obligation to make sure they know what those benefits are and have assistance in developing their claims. These benefits are important not only to our current veterans but to those who are entering the armed services today. Ensuring that these brave individuals will receive benefits after they leave the service will improve recruitment and retention which will enhance military readiness.

Providing resources at the local level will greatly improve outreach capability. County Veteran Service Officers are already doing great work in outreach and claims development. With more resources and better coordination within the VA, they can do even more to assist our veterans.

It is clear that we need to improve outreach to our veterans. That is why I encourage this subcommittee to give the Veterans Outreach Improvement Act of 2007 its full consideration, and I look forward to working with each of you in furthering the cause of our nation's veterans.